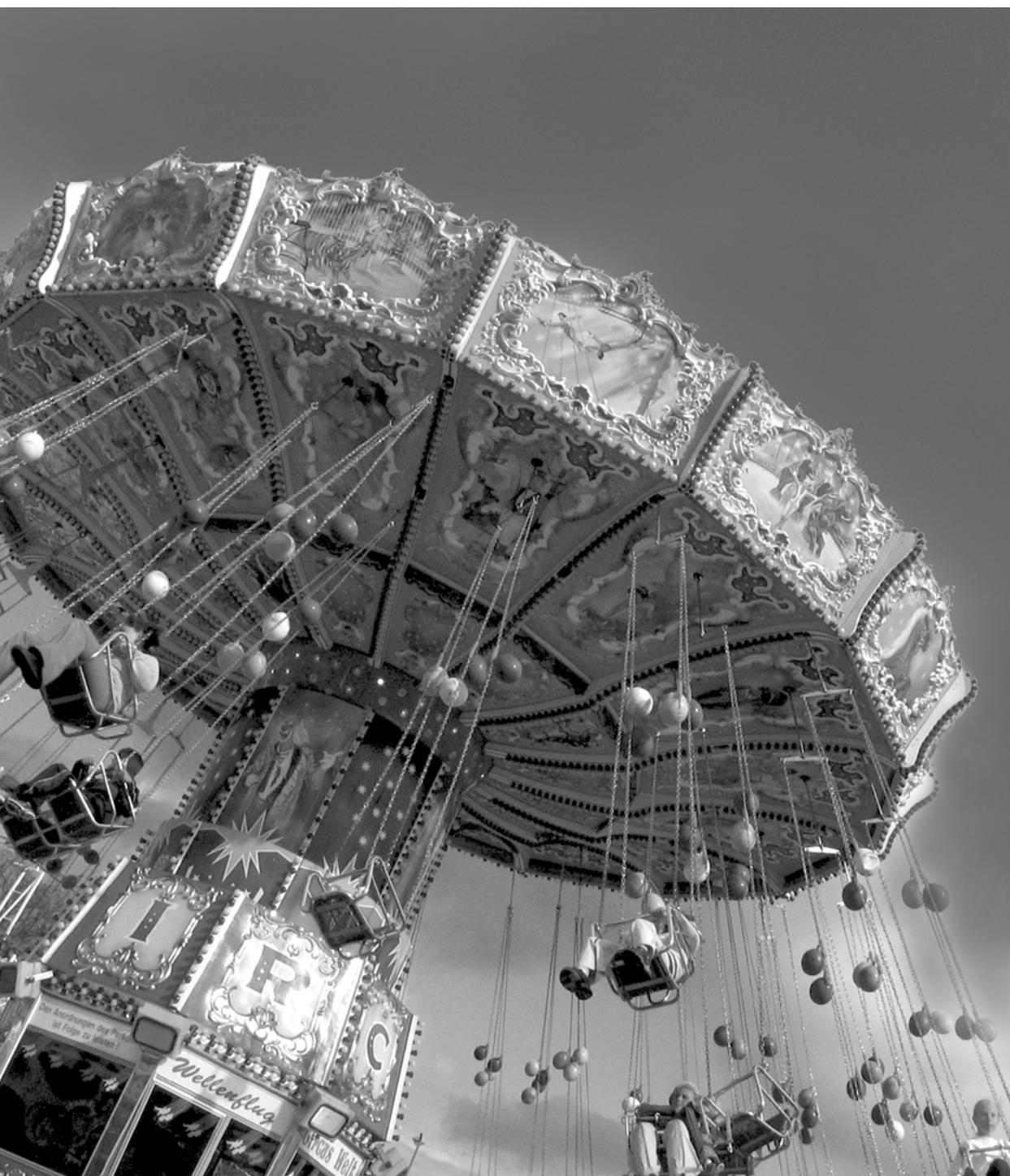


Grand Duchy of Luxembourg

ABOUT

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CAPITAL:
LUXEMBOURG

**NEIGHBOURING
COUNTRIES:**
GERMANY
BELGIUM
FRANCE

AREA:
2,586 KM²

POPULATION:
537,000 INHABITANTS,
INCLUDING
238,800 FOREIGNERS

FORM OF GOVERNMENT:
CONSTITUTIONAL
MONARCHY

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Festivals and Traditions

Most customs and practices in Luxembourg have their roots in the country's religious traditions. Nevertheless, numerous festivals, ceremonies and rituals, the most significant of which are outlined on the following pages, are tied to everyday rural life, which defined the existence of a broad spectrum of the population until well into the 20th century. The rapid development towards a multicultural society, in which representatives of the most diverse nationalities live together, has seen the gamut of local traditions expand to include several new dimensions. Thus, in recent years, certain traditions hailing from foreign cultures have seeped into the festive and folkloristic practices of the Luxembourg people. By contrast, other customs, often nurtured and cultivated over centuries by our ancestors, are in the process of losing their original significance or of disappearing altogether.

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Folkloristic dance group in Luxembourg City (© Christof Weber/SIP)

Over the months...

January

1 January: *Neijoerschdag* (New Year)

Happy New Year!

In Luxembourg, as elsewhere in the world, it is custom on New Year's Day for relatives and friends to wish one another happiness, good health and other blessings for the year ahead. On this occasion, children receive from their grandparents and/or godparents a so-called *neit Jäerchen* (little new year): a small gift in the form of confectionery, money or similar. Typically, in the early days of January, service providers such as postmen, newspaper deliverers and dustmen also are given a tip – a nice gesture that is gradually dying out, however.

The expression *Päffenneijoerschdag* (made up of *Päif* – used to designate a whistle, an organ pipe, a pipe or a loser even – and *Neijoerschdag*, meaning "New Year's Day") is incidentally used in Luxembourgish to indicate a day or event that will never take place, much like the Greek calends in English.

6 January: *Dräikinneksgdag* (Epiphany)

Bean in the cake

According to Catholic liturgy, the 13th day after Christmas commemorates the *epiphanie domini*, the manifestation of Christ, one of the oldest church celebrations. Its colloquial designation of Three Kings' Day refers to the Christmas story from the Gospel according to Matthew, following which on 6 January the Three Wise Men Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar from the East were guided by the star of Bethlehem to Jesus and brought him gifts: gold, incense and myrrh. The "king cake" (*galette des rois*) served up on this day goes back to the custom of appointing on the eve of 6 January, within the family, a man to be king and a woman to be queen. For this purpose, a black bean (king) and a white bean (queen) were baked into the cake. The king and queen were then obliged to entertain their subjects. Today, the beans are generally replaced by a small enamel-threatening porcelain figure, whose real purpose most pastry lovers are most likely completely oblivious to.



Liichtmëssdag (© SIP)

February/March

2 February: Liichtmëssdag (Candlemas)

3 February: Saint Blaise

Glowing lanterns

Saint Blaise, patron saint of numerous trades, is one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. He is thought not only to guard livestock, but also to protect people from throat diseases, ulcers and the plague. To honour him, churches carry out a "blessing of the throat" on the evening of his name day. The day before, Luxembourgish children go *liichten*. Carrying simple *Liichtebengelcher* (wooden rods tipped with little candles or battery-operated lights), they go from house to house singing an old song that once was used to beg for food, but today is invoked to solicit primarily confectionery or coins: "*Léiwer Härgottsbliesschen, göff ons Speck an Ierbessen, ee Pond, zwee Pond, dat anert Joer, da gi der gesond...*" (roughly: Dear Saint Blaise, give us bacon and peas, one pound, two pound, next year you'll be healthy once again...).

This celebration is also one of the oldest of the Catholic Church. Its name is derived from the German "Lichtmesse", meaning Candlemas. The Gospel according to John sees it as a reminder of how Christ defined himself as the light of the world, as the rising sun and as he who brings light into the darkness. The custom on these days of performing blessings of the cross and engaging in light processions, also seen as an expression of the joyful anticipation of the impending spring, dates back to the late 10th century.

Carnival: Fetten Donneschdeg (Fat Thursday)

Oxen dances and tie stumps

Candlemas marks the beginning of *Fuesend* (Carnival), which reaches its first climax on *Fetten Donneschdeg*. On this day, lavishly decorated *Danzenochsen* (carnival oxen) were once driven through the alleys of the capital by the local butchers, accompanied by music bands and festively dressed master butchers – all reminiscent of bygone, heathen sacrificial rituals.

A different custom that has survived to the present day dictates that on this day, women assume control in an otherwise mostly male-dominated society. They use this opportunity to unceremoniously cut off the ties of unsuspecting men, divesting them of what identifies them as the representatives of the allegedly stronger sex.

Carnival: Fuessonndeg (Carnival Sunday) and Fuesméisinddeg (Shrove Monday)

The other carnival

In Luxembourg, *Fuessonndeg* is traditionally celebrated with parties and dances (*Fuesbaler*), while the subsequent *Fuesméisinddeg* calls for parades (*Kavalkaden*) in numerous locations throughout the country. These occasions provide an opportunity for people to kick up their heels before the impending period of fasting and abstinence. Many revellers, known as *Fuesgecken*, profit from the masked balls and parades to don fancy dress and abandon themselves to cheerful merriment under the guise of anonymity.

Carnival: Äschermëttwoch (Ash Wednesday)

End of cheerfulness and winter

Tradition dictates that on Ash Wednesday, in Remich, a town in the country's east, not only the carnival period but also the cold dark season is farewelled with a symbolic blaze. To this effect a straw doll – usually of the male variety, known as a *Stréimännchen*; unless it is a leap year, in which case it is a female doll, a *Stréifrächen* – is carried in a musically accompanied parade through the alleys of the little Moselle town. At the end, the scapegoat must atone for the transgressions of the carnival revellers. As a symbol for the costly carnival period that has just come to an end, the straw doll carries a wallet and an empty bottle. It is tied to the railing of the Moselle bridge linking Luxembourg and Germany, doused with petrol and set alight with torches. The action lasts a mere few minutes, with the doll's ashes landing in the river – yet another symbol for the definitive dispersal of winter's evil spirits and the impending spring.



Buergbrennen in the capital (© Jean-Paul Kieffer/SIP)



Bretzelsonndeg (© SIP/Zineb Ruppert)

The exact origin of this incendiary celebration is not known. The earliest documented mentions date back to the year 1884. In the past, a *Stréimännchen* was also set ablaze in Echternach, in the country's east. In the meantime, however, this tradition no longer features on the events calendar of the small abbey town.

Strictly speaking, the carnival period ends on Ash Wednesday, but in Luxembourg the merriment is not over by a long shot. Quite the contrary. Here the carnival period lasts until the fourth Sunday in Lent, which lies in the middle of the fasting period and is therefore called *Halleffaaschten* (Mid-Lent) or else *Bretzelsonndeg* (Pretzel Sunday).

The first Sunday of Lent: *Buergsonndeg* (Buerg Sunday)

Ablaze with fire

The heathen custom of symbolically banishing winter and its evil spirits while also welcoming spring with a great fire was already practised in ancient Rome. In bygone days, large woodpiles went up in flames; these days, metre-high wooden crosses, wrapped in straw, brushwood and other flammable material, known in Luxembourgish as *Buergen*, are set alight. These are not *Buergen* in the sense of castles. The expression, rather, comes from the Latin *comburere* and means "to burn". After the Roman period, the *Buergbrennen* (burning of the *Buergen*) was adopted by Christian itinerant preachers, who scattered the residual ash over sinners, exhorting them to improve and reflect. The traditional celebration has of course long lost this purpose. Today the spectacle occasionally goes by the English "Burn the Cross" and sees onlookers gather around the blazing flames with mulled wine, sausages and pea soup. The most tradition-conscious municipalities in the Grand Duchy are those in which the fire is ignited by the most recently married local couple. Or else by the couple due to exchange wedding vows next. Be that as it may – the *Buergbrennen* is undoubtedly one of the few customs that has not only stood the test of time and outlasted social changes, but also enjoys increasing popularity.

Mid-Lent: *Bretzelsonndeg* (Pretzel Sunday)

Love and courtship

On *Bretzelsonndeg*, men are expected to present their sweethearts with a pretzel, preferably as large and as beautifully decorated as possible. In return, come Easter, they can expect to receive Easter eggs from their ladies – unless it is a leap year, in which case the roles are reversed. Then the girls get to present the pretzel and the boys the eggs.

It is not known where exactly this custom originates from. What is known, however, is that it is tied to wedding celebrations and was once also known as *Fastenbohnensonntag* (German word made up of *Fastensonntag* and *Bohne*, meaning "Lent Sunday" and "bean", respectively). Recent years have once again seen the capital play host to a large parade on this day, during which the tasty pastry is distributed to the people in great quantities – not so much as a token of love but more as an effective publicity stunt in favour of the baking trade and other businesses.

April

1 April: *An den Abrëll schécken!* (April Fools' Day)

Haha!

The usually harmless and occasionally very funny tradition of playing an April Fools' Day joke, i.e. tricking people with invented or embellished stories, tales or information, leading them astray or having them carry out a ridiculous assignment, is known throughout Europe. Fully unsupported, on the other hand, are the origin and provenance of these so-called April Fools' Day jokes, which these days often take on the character of a hoax, in the form of deliberately false reports, newspaper canards or urban legends. One of the many assumptions is that, already in antiquity, according to popular belief numerous days were thought to be unlucky. Among these, 1 April was regularly included.

CULINARY FESTIVALS

In a country known for its love of good food, it is not surprising that numerous festivals, traditions and customs revolve around food, drink and enjoyment. In addition to culinary events with a more local character and simple apple, damson, beer, pumpkin and potato festivals, the annual calendar also features some noteworthy dates that are popular nationwide and held in high general regard.

The first one takes place in February in the small village of Boevange-sur-Attet, which every year hosts the so-called *Kënnbak-Stee*, a public auction of the cooked and smoked chin portions of the pig. Folklore researchers have revealed that in bygone days a pig's lower jaw was sacrificed to various saints: to Saint Apollonia to stave off toothache and to Saint Anthony and Saint Valentine to thus ensure protection against pig diseases. Why today, with other means available to fight toothache and epizootic diseases, *Kënnbäck* continue to be auctioned to the highest bidders, after having been solemnly blessed in a church service – who knows? (Presumably to be subsequently devoured with relish.)

The next fixed appointment for gourmands, having enjoyed the summer at various barbecue festivals, is on the second weekend in September. Since 1950, this is when the *Maacher Drauwen- a Wäifest* (grape and wine festival) takes place in Grevenmacher, the first of its kind

that has in the meantime been adopted by several other merry-making Moselle localities. In celebration of the wine and the annual grape harvest, a big fireworks display is launched on the Saturday and a festival parade filters through the Moselle town on the Sunday. In addition, each year a wine queen is elected and crowned in a festive ceremony before the eyes of "her people". Concerts, musical parades and of course wine tastings contribute to the three *Maacher Nationalfeierdeeg* ("national days" of Grevenmacher) being a highlight of Luxembourg's festive calendar.

On the second Sunday in October, it is the turn of the country's north, namely Vianden. Ever since 1935, with two short interruptions during the Second World War and the 1960s, this is where the *Veiner Nëssmoort* (Vianden walnut market) takes place. Already during the early 20th century, this region was home to almost a fifth of all the Grand Duchy's walnut trees, keeping several walnut merchants and numerous smaller nut vendors busy, who sold their produce at various markets. Since 1970, the *Veiner Nëssmoort* has become an integral part of Luxembourg's local, even national, heritage. In addition to the walnut itself, several delicacies derived from the tasty fruit are on offer: spirits, liquors, oils, cakes, tarts, biscuits, liver pâtés... while bands strike up in the narrow alleyways of the little medieval town.



The children go *klibberen* (© SIP)

EASTER

Gréngen Donneschdeg (Maundy Thursday)

Rattles instead of bells

Why is Maundy Thursday called *Gréngen Donneschdeg*, i.e. "Green Thursday"? This is due to the fact that this day falls within the fasting period and that, during times in which transgressions of the abstinence commandment still met with harsh secular punishments, on this day, the day of the Last Supper according to the Bible, nothing but herb soups and green vegetables were consumed.

These days, the custom that has survived is that of children – on this day and the three subsequent ones – going *klibberen* (roughly: going rattling, i.e. making their way through the streets bearing simple, wooden musical instruments that make a lot of noise). Legend has it that, after mass on Maundy Thursday, the church bells fly to Rome to make their Easter confession to the pope at the Vatican. Instead of the bells, therefore, the wooden rattles, ratchets and drums of the younger generation must three times a day announce the church services held on Good Friday, Holy Saturday and the resurrection matins on Easter Sunday: "*D'Moiesklack laut, d'Mëttesklack laut, d'Ownesklock laut*" (the morning, afternoon and evening bell is ringing) – a church tradition that is said to hail from Egypt and was allegedly intended to drive away evil spirits. As a reward for their deafening dedication as bell replacements, on their last round the boys called *Klibberjongen* – who in recent years also include an increasing number of girls – receive Easter eggs in many and various forms, confectionery and, preferably, some loose change. To express their thanks, they then all break into: "*Dick dick daack, haut ass Ouschterdag...*" (dik-dik-dak, today is Easter...).

Karfreideg (Good Friday)

Meatless

Even those who throughout the entire year pay hardly any thought to church commandments tend to fall prey to a guilty Catholic conscience on Good Friday. This explains how the day of death of the Saviour has become the annual fish day par excellence – these scaly creatures are after all regarded as a symbol of Christ. All the other customs that were once strongly linked to this day have fallen victim to secular times. Who still sows seeds into the earth on what is seen as the most auspicious day of the most auspicious week of the year for sowing? And who still eats bread baked on Good Friday that is sacred and sanctifies?

Ouschtersonndeg (Easter Sunday)

Searching for eggs

All Christian countries are home to numerous Easter customs that have their origin either in religious traditions, in heathen practices, or in both: Easter eggs, Easter water, Easter lamb, Easter fire, Easter candle, Easter breakfast, Easter walk, Easter presents... Many of these customs still exist today, even if their religious background no longer plays a significant role. Undoubtedly the most popular is that of the colouring of the eggs, which are subsequently hidden in the garden for the children to find under the happy gaze of their family. A lot of fun is also had with the game of egg tapping (*Técken*), in which hard-boiled Easter eggs are tapped against each other. He or she whose egg retains its intact shell the longest is crowned the winner.



Péckvillercher at the Éimaischen (© Rob Kieffer)



Geenzerfest in Wiltz (© Fotoclub Wooltz)

Easter Monday: Éimaischen (pottery fair)

Earthenware birds

More significant than Easter Sunday in Luxembourg is without a doubt Easter Monday, when Luxembourg City and Nospelt, a small village in the west of the Grand Duchy, celebrate the Éimaischen. This refers to the market held in both these locations and named after the biblical town of Emmaus, where Jesus Christ allegedly met two apostles after his resurrection.

The oldest written source on the Éimaischen dates from 1827. Having dwindled in popularity around 1900, the traditional pottery market once again gained in significance just before and especially after the Second World War. In recent times in particular, the Emmaus festival has undergone a soar in popularity, linked essentially to the growing offer, year after year, of Péckvillercher. These traditional clay figures in the shape of a bird, which produce a tone when blown into, come in a wide range of artistic styles and have in the meantime developed into sought-after collector's items. In the vernacular, Péckvillercher are sometimes also known as Léinefässercher, Spriddelcher or Freieschtasen.

Third Sunday after Easter: Oktav (Virgin Mary pilgrimage)

Virgin Mary pilgrims

Ever since the 17th century, the country's most significant religious celebration has taken place every year in the form of a pilgrimage to the miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary carved out of lime wood. The latter was appointed patroness of the city of Luxembourg in 1666 and patron saint of the entire country in 1678, to put a halt to the raging plague epidemics, famines and wars. The pilgrimage to the "consoler of the afflicted" takes place from the third to the fifth Sunday after Easter and ends with a ceremonial final procession. The name Oktav incidentally comes from a time when the worship of the statue of the Virgin Mary lasted only eight days, not two weeks like today.

Along with the pilgrimages and masses in the capital's Cathedral of Our Lady, the neighbouring Place Guillaume II (Knuedler) has since time immemorial played host to the Oktavmäertchen. This little market provides believers with an opportunity after their church visit to fortify themselves with food and drink and purchase one or the other souvenir. Over time, this once unassuming market has developed into a kind of fair with countless food and souvenir stands, which now only rarely reveal a religious background.

May

1 May: Meekranz (May wreath)

Wreaths of young foliage

Long before 1 May was celebrated as International Workers' Day (from 1890 onwards), May customs abounded in our regions. Often, these customs were still based on heathen sacrificial feasts before being incorporated into Christian traditions. For instance, to keep evil spirits at bay, blessed herbs and consecrated palm branches were once scattered throughout houses, stables and barns, large crosses were drawn in chalk on doors and rooms were sprinkled with holy water, which was subsequently also consumed.

While previously, real May trees were erected, today many Luxembourg inhabitants merely head into the forest on 1 May to collect branches with fresh leaves and weave them into Meekräanz (May wreaths), which are then carried into the villages and towns in a procession and eventually hung up above house doors and on façades. The start of the warm sunny season is thus heralded and frequently doused with a brisk drinking session, during which more than just the so-called May wine flows.



Sprangpressessiou in Echternach (Claudine Bosseler © ONT)

Whit Monday: GeenZFest (gorse festival)

Yellow splendour

Every year since 1948, Wiltz, a little town in the north, celebrates the GeenZFest over the weekend of Pentecost. Since 1949, its culmination is the gorse parade on Whit Monday, which features brightly decorated floats, local music societies and folklore groups as well as fanfare orchestras and show bands that have travelled in from across the borders. The end of the parade is made up of the gorse carriage adorned with countless small yellow gorse blossoms, on which the gorse queen sits enthroned, accompanied by her six maids of honour.

This colourful spring festival was founded by photographer Tony Mander and some of his friends, out of a love for the nature surrounding their home town and the music, songs and folklore of the Luxembourg Ardennes.

Whit Tuesday: Sprangpressessiou (hopping procession)

Hopping pilgrims

On 16 November 2010, the Sprangpressessiou of Echternach was included on the UNESCO representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This recognition honours the uniqueness, the strong identity and the continuity of a religious tradition with origins dating back to the late 15th century. Ever since then, every year on Whit Tuesday more than ten thousand pilgrims from within and beyond the country flock to the grave of Saint Willibrord, which lies in the crypt of the Echternach basilica.

The Irish-Scottish monk and missionary settled in Echternach in 698, where he founded an abbey, which over the course of the centuries developed into a significant spiritual and cultural centre of the region. The "procession of the hopping saints", first documented in 1497, is nevertheless not just an expression of the veneration of Willibrord. Researchers have also interpreted it as a thanksgiving for the end of an animal epidemic during Carolingian times as well as a medieval procession to protect against Saint Vitus' dance.

To this day, the way the Echternach procession participants move has given rise to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The misguided assumption that the hopping procession involves hopping several steps forwards before hopping backwards again has led to an expression that is popularly used when referring to a matter in which little headway is being made. This erroneous impression may have originated from a period when the procession was less well organised than it is today and as a result occasionally came to a standstill, leading pilgrims intermittently to hop on one spot or even retreat. The fact is that since 1947 only forward hops are performed in Echternach, which involve a diagonal step to the left followed by a diagonal step to the right.

June

23 June: Nationalfeierdag (national day)

In honour of the monarch and his people

Since the late 18th century, it has been a tradition in Luxembourg to celebrate the birthday of the sovereign at the time. William III, king of the Netherlands and grand duke of Luxembourg, was born on 19 February 1817, but in spite of this, in 1850 the public holiday – still known as Kinneksdag (King's day) back then – was transferred to 17 June, the birthday of his wife Sophie. The reason for this was the proximity in date of the grand-ducal birthday to the death day of his brother, Prince Alexander, who passed away on 20 February 1848. Under Grand Duchess Charlotte, national day, henceforth known as Groussherzoginsgebuertdag (Grand Duchess' birthday) and elevated to a patriotic public holiday in the true sense, fell on her birthday, 23 January. Due to the climatically unfavourable time of year, however, it was decided in 1961 to transfer it to 23 June – a date that was also kept under Grand Duke Jean, during whose reign the expression Nationalfeierdag became established. This date was maintained under the reign of his son, current Grand Duke Henri, despite it no longer having any direct connection to the head of state.

YOUNG TRADITIONS

As is well known, almost half the population in Luxembourg is made up of foreign citizens. Regardless of whether they hail from Europe or other continents, all of them have brought into their new home not just their language, their skills, even their everyday customs, but also many folklore, religious and cultural customs and traditions.

Some foreign traditions have in the meantime become permanent fixtures on Luxembourg's events calendar. On Ascension Day, for instance, an official public holiday in Luxembourg, thousands of Portuguese, who make up Luxembourg's strongest foreign population group, embark upon a mile-long procession to the statue of Fatima that sits on a hill outside the Oesling town of Wiltz. This is where, in January 1945, during the difficult struggles of the Battle of the Bulge, Luxembourg inhabitants erected stations of the cross and pledged to erect a monument in honour of Our Lady of Fatima, should they survive the war. The corresponding pilgrimage site was inaugurated on 13 July 1952. Over the course of the Portuguese immigration, the sanctuary gained not only in religious importance. Held every year since 1968 on Ascension Day, the Fatima procession has indeed gradually developed into a large-scale festival, which, in particular for the younger generation, is not so much about a profession of faith, but above all an expression of Portuguese identity and the solidarity of this community in its Luxembourgish exile. Certainly, among the approximately 20,000 pilgrims, who every year make their way to the Wiltz statue of the Virgin Mary, Luxembourgish participants are most definitely in the minority.

Incidentally: on 22 June, the country's Portuguese citizens are not, as is often falsely assumed, celebrating Luxembourg's national day. Instead, they are marking the festivities of São João, which are celebrated in Porto on the night of 23 to 24 June in one of Europe's largest and liveliest street festivals: a huge party featuring music, dance, balloons, the eating of sardines, drinking of wine, fireworks at midnight, exuberant revellers, who hit one another on the head with plastic hammers. All this against, as is often the case, a gradually dwindling religious backdrop.

Much less numerous, but no less festive and hardy when it comes to drinking than their southern European neighbours, are the Irish in Luxembourg. On 17 March, they honour their national Saint Patrick, who lived during the 5th century and is believed to have been the first Christian missionary in Ireland. Known as Saint Patrick's Day, this day is celebrated worldwide by the Irish, Irish immigrants and increasingly by the non-Irish, in the form of a people's fair with parades, processions and music festivals. The most striking aspect: on Saint Patrick's Day the world turns green! Even rivers are dyed green that day, as well as beer, though not Guinness, Ireland's national beer, which would be akin to sacrilege. In Luxembourg, the Irish meet up with their kindred spirits from other nations to celebrate and toast one another mainly in Grund, the capital's quarter that is known for its pub culture.



Torch procession on the eve of national day (© SIP/Charles Caratini)

The actual celebrations start on the eve of 23 June with a torch procession followed by large-scale fireworks with musical accompaniment in the capital and elsewhere in the country. Visits by various members of the grand-ducal family also take place to mark the occasion in other localities throughout the country. On national day itself, parades, church services, concerts and receptions are held. The capital also hosts a military parade and a celebratory *Te Deum* in the Cathedral of Our Lady. Gun salutes end the day in honour of the Luxembourg monarch and his people.

August

15 August: *Léiffrawëschdag* (Assumption Day)

Blessed herbs

Léiffrawëschdag, also known as *Léiffraenkrautdag* or *Krautwëschdag*, is a harvest festival, the origins of which date back to pre-Christian times. Traditionally, the blessing of the herbs, documented as early as the 6th century AD, involved priests blessing herbs that had been strung together into a bunch (*Wësch*), the believers having brought them to the church for this very purpose. Initially the number of herbs was restricted to less than a dozen. Over time, however, the bunch included more and more plants, provided they – whether allegedly or actually – possessed medicinal properties and exuded a strong smell.

Once the holy Virgin Mary was appointed patron saint of the country in 1678, the blessing of the herbs was accompanied by a Virgin Mary procession. Today the traditional herb blessing on Assumption Day, an official public holiday, is carried out in just a few of the country's localities.

24 August: *Schueberfouer* (Schueber funfair)

Fairground with tradition

The *Schueberfouer* is the national people's fair per se. According to historical evidence, the origin of this event, which embodies both the official funfair of the capital (*Stater Kiermes*) and the largest fair in the entire Grand Duchy, can be traced back to 20 October 1340. On this day, John the Blind, king of Bohemia and count of Luxembourg, signed a deed authorising merchants from Luxembourg and surroundings to hold a regular annual market, "that commences on the eve of Saint Bartholomew (24 August) and lasts eight days". After the 1789 French Revolution, the former trade and sales fair gradually evolved into the pure entertainment event that the three-week-long *Schueberfouer* has since become. After its location was transferred to the four-hectare field known as Glacis in the Limpertsberg quarter in 1893, it was able to develop into a fairground that today attracts people from all over the Greater Region: over two million visitors every year, more than two hundred attractions, including twenty-five amusement park rides such as big wheel, rollercoaster and ghost train, dozens of restaurants, food stalls, lottery stands and shooting galleries, almost a hundred stands selling various goods and showcasing other operators, and recently once again traditional Belle Époque attractions such as a merry-go-round, an official opening featuring the *Hämmelsmarsch*, culinary specialities such as *gebake Fësch* (fried fish) and *Gromperekichelcher* (potato cakes), a household name known to every Luxembourg inhabitant since childhood...

Said *Hämmelsmarsch* is an old Luxembourgish tradition that consists in the local music society going through the streets playing the eponymous tune, to invite all the residents to the fair. The name of the parade and of the piece of music stems from the fact that in earlier days, and



Opening of the Schueberfouer with the *Hämelsmarsch* (© Laurent Schwaller)

to this day in the capital, a sheep was taken along. The origin of the name *Schueberfouer*, on the other hand, has to date not met with an unequivocal explanation. It appears to be derived from either its original location, the *Schuedbierg*, or else from *Schober*, the German word for store room that was adjacent to every farm house and used to store animal feed, since ultimately the original fair took place around the day of Saint Bartholomew, i.e. around harvest time.

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November

1 November: *d'Traulicht brennen* (All Saints' Day)

2 November: *Allerséilen* (All Souls' Day)

Spookiness

In the church year, 1 November is the day all saints are commemorated, including those never canonised or whose sanctity only God has knowledge of. Since the 10th century, All Souls' Day on 2 November means an additional celebration day, which commemorates all the deceased, who according to Catholic belief are in purgatory and have not yet entered into full communion with God. Associated with this is the blessing of the graves adorned with lights, which in many places is already carried out on the afternoon of All Saints' Day.

The English expression "All Hallows Eve", indicating the eve of All Saints' Day, has given rise to a celebration that has its origins in the old European pumpkin festivals and ghost evictions and that has, since the 1990s, found its way back to us from North America in the heavily commercialised and secularised form of Halloween. Long before Irish

emigrants headed for the USA around 1830 armed with the original popular traditions around All Saints' Day, the lads from the local Ardennes regions were passing their time hollowing out beetroots, inserting a candle in them and scaring the girls and young women, who were leaving the church as the men were on their way back to the barns with their stock. What today is known as Halloween was back then simply referred to as *d'Traulicht brennen*. In both cases, the objective and outcome were the same: to protect oneself from the souls of the dead and to resist the darkness of the oncoming winter for a little longer, beetroots were hollowed out, with eyes, nose and mouth cut out and a candle inserted inside, before being placed on a stick and carried through the village. Back then nobody could have possibly imagined retail chains selling rubber masks and other ghost outfits.

3 November: *Haupeschdag* (Saint Hubertus' Day)

Patron saint of hunters

Saint Hubertus lived from 656 to 727. Legend has it that, one Sunday when he was hunting in the Ardennes, he saw a stag carrying a crucifix between its antlers. At the same time he heard a voice calling to him: "For how long, Hubertus, will you squander your time with earthly pleasures, forsaking your Lord!" As though struck by lightning, he got off his horse, dropped to his knees and said, much like Saint Paul before him: "Oh Lord, what should I do?" And the voice answered: "Go and seek Saint Lambertus, who will reveal my will to you." Hubertus did as commanded by heaven, and joined the clergy, becoming a renowned bishop and saint, patron saint of the hunters. In the past, 3 November, traditionally the opening date of the battue season, would see a mass held in his honour, attended by hunters in full regalia.



Halloween in Luxembourg: *d'Traulicht* brennen (© Tourist Center ASBL)



Bärbelendag in the south of the country (© LDBC)

The Oesling village of Munshausen has a very special connection to Saint Hubertus: since 1983, its coat of arms features the stag with the cross between its antlers. In addition, ever since 1989, on the Sunday after Saint Hubertus' Day, the village of Munshausen holds the *Munzer Haupeschmaart* (Munshausen Hubertus market), which is said to have already existed in the 17th century. To celebrate the occasion, the open-air museum A Robbesscheier puts on a spread of mostly regional delicacies. This day also sees a revival of the old traditions and customs surrounding rural life in the Oesling.

In recent years, a similar event takes place at the beginning of November in the Mullerthal village of Berdorf.

December

4 December: *Bärbelendag* (Saint Barbara's Day)

Protectress of the miners

Legend has it that Saint Barbara lived in the Middle East during the 3rd century AD and was decapitated by her own father, because she refused to give up her Christian faith and her virginal devotion to God. This conduct in the face of persecution and death is regarded as a symbol of an unwavering faith and of the determination to defend it, which is why Barbara is called upon as a holy helper against thunderstorms, fire risks, fever, the plague and against sudden and unforeseeable death in general. She thus eventually became the patron saint of, among others, carpenters, roofers, electricians as well as firemen and miners. The latter also chose her as their patroness because, according to legend, she was protected by a rock, which opened up and provided her with some temporary protection from the grasp of her persecutors.

On *Bärbelendag*, all mining localities of the Grand Duchy, including those where the last iron ore mines were closed in 1981, host parades, in which miners and firemen often still don their uniforms and carry a statue of their patron saint along with them. In addition to church services, other commemoration events are also held in honour of the miners who toiled under the harshest conditions during the 19th and 20th centuries. Almost 1,500 men between the ages of 13 and 78 perished in Luxembourg's underground mines from 1845 to 1981.

6 December: *Neklosdag* (Saint Nicholas' Day)

Benevolent man and his sinister companion

Before Christmas also began establishing itself in Luxembourg as an event for exchanging gifts, undoubtedly *Neklosdag* was the most eagerly anticipated day of the entire year for children. Days before the actual name day of the generous man, who allegedly lived during the 4th century as a bishop in present-day Turkey and devoted himself to the happiness of children, children already *setzen de Schung*. This means that in the run-up to the day, in the evening children place their shoe or slipper in the hallway in the hope of receiving a little gift from *Kleeschen* (Saint Nicholas). Those, however, who have been naughty, lazy at school or have not always obeyed their parents in previous months, risk getting a rod as punishment from Saint Nicholas' servant Ruprecht, known in Luxembourg as the *Housecker*.

The actual awarding of gifts takes place during the night of 5 to 6 December. This is when Saint Nicholas and his dark-skinned companion fill up the plates laid out on the dining room table the night before with all sorts of confectionery, toys and other gifts that bring a shine to children's eyes.



Kleeschen and Housecker (© SIP/Zineb Ruppert)



Chrëschtmaart with wooden chalets (© Jean-Paul Kieffer/SIP)

Incidentally, Luxembourg's Kleeschen must under no circumstances be mistaken for the American Santa Claus or the French père Noël – these are thoroughly distinct gentlemen. It is also useful to know that Luxembourg is the only country in which children attending fundamental school get a day off on 6 December, so that upon waking they can focus their attention on opening their presents.

24 December: *Hellegowend* (Christmas Eve)

25 December: *Chrësctdag* (Christmas)

Commercialism in red and white

To this very day, over Christmas most Luxembourgish families will indeed erect a festively decorated Christmas tree with a lovingly assembled Kräppchen (little manger) in their living room. Nevertheless, the tradition – during the Advent season and in addition to the time-honoured Advent calendars hanging in every household – of Chrëschtmaert (Christmas markets) being organised throughout the country's larger localities, featuring festively decorated wooden chalets, and the tradition of gifts being mutually exchanged on Christmas Eve among families before they sit down to a feast on a richly laid-out dining table are all modern customs that have imposed themselves in the Grand Duchy only during the last quarter of the 20th century. Previously, believers would attend the Metten (midnight mass) at midnight, but Christmas festivities were to a large extent free from the covetousness that characterises the retail industry. Quite apart from the fact that much earlier, Christmas was not celebrated at all and it was only on 6 January, on Epiphany, that a celebration was held, in memory of both the birth of Jesus Christ and the christening of the Saviour.

31 December: New Year's Eve

Fortune-telling

What today is inextricably linked to New Year's Eve appears to have been more of an exception in bygone days. Or how is the comment by Luxembourg poet and folklore researcher Edmond de la Fontaine (better known by his pseudonym Dicks) to be understood when, towards the end of the 19th century, he wrote that in some places midnight would see people congratulating one another with a mutual "Happy New Year" and "possibly with a suitable song and piece of music"? Today popular New Year's Eve traditions amount to exuberant party atmospheres with deafening fire crackers and a fireworks display at the stroke of midnight. Or is there anyone who, on New Year's Eve, like in days gone by, still pours liquid lead into water in order to read the future from the resulting lead figures?

—



1 January: *Neijoerschdag* (New Year)

Happy New Year!

6 January: *Dräikinneksgdag* (Epiphany)
Bean in the cake

JANUARY



2 February: *Liichtmëssdag* (Candlemas)
Glowing lanterns

3 February: Saint Blaise

Carnival: *Fetten Donneschdeg* (Fat Thursday)
Oxen dances and tie stumps

Carnival: *Fuessonndeg* (Carnival Sunday) and
Fuesméinddeg (Shrove Monday)
The other carnival

Carnival: *Äschermëttwoch* (Ash Wednesday)
End of cheerfulness and winter

The first Sunday of Lent: *Buergsonndeg* (Buerg Sunday)
Ablaze with fire

Mid-Lent: *Bretzelsonndeg* (Pretzel Sunday)
Love and courtship

1 April: *An den Abrëll schécken!* (April Fools' Day)
Haha!

Gréngen Donneschdeg (Maundy Thursday)
Rattles instead of bells

Karfriedeg (Good Friday)
Meatless

Ouschtersonndeg (Easter Sunday)
Searching for eggs

Easter Monday: *Éimaischen* (pottery fair)
Earthenware birds

Third Sunday after Easter: *Oktav* (Virgin Mary pilgrimage)
Virgin Mary pilgrims

FEBRUARY/MARCH



APRIL

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